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ABSTRACT

Presidential candidates in the United States tend to seek consensus rather than to try to discover new answers to problems and to convince voters that they should be elected to implement those answers. Reporters in the mass media emphasize objectivity and fairness in their reporting. This emphasis produces an intense interest in the "electability" of a candidate and the techniques and strategies that candidates use to get elected, with a resulting de-emphasis on the viability of solutions offered by candidates to public problems. With campaigning techniques as their main focus, reporters become concerned with popular opinion polls, "mistakes" by candidates, moral issues, and image questions. Reporting on these items in turn reinforces an emphasis by the candidates upon such questions, both in their planning and in their public presentations, particularly for media consumption. Thus candidates become involved with building their campaigns upon consensus rather than upon fresh leadership positions that can be sold to the public through careful explanation and scrutiny. (AEA)

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MASS MEDIA AND CONSENSUS POLITICS

A Critical Evaluation of the Coverage of The 1980 Presidential Election Campaigns

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Introduction

Campaigning for president is the most difficult job we demand of American politicians. In recent years the campaign has lengthened so that to be considered a viable candidate, a person must be in the public view and on the road for at least two to four years before the first ballots are cast. At the same time, Congress has so restricted a candidate's means of raising money that by the time the first primary or caucus vote occurs, candidates are weary and broke -- and facing the possibility of another ten months of intensive activity.

If there is any job that's harder, it's probably that of the journalist covering a presidential campaign. He is forced to spend weeks away from home, catching buses, planes and trains at all hours of the day and night, arguing with his home office about expense accounts -- and, of course, filing stories on the candidate's progress and activity. The journalist must often walk a thin line between being a friend and a critic of the candidate and campaign workers. He must possess enough sense of politics to know when the candidate is doing well and when he is not. He must be alert to the subtle shifts and changes of front line politics. In one of his more sympathetic moments, Richard Nixon recognized the difficulties reporters have in covering a presidential campaign. Late in 1967 when Nixon was beginning his successful run for the presidency, a reporter asked him why he wanted to be president. He parried the quesiton by asking why anyone would want to be a reporter and added, "I think covering a presidential campaign is worse than running in one." (White, 1970, p. 160)

The relationship between these two political actors -- the candidate and the journalist -- is critical to the political process. A candidate cannot live without the press. Despite his long campaign, the mass media provide his primary way of reaching the majority of American voters. This situation places a heavy burden on the journalist who, almost by default, becomes the arbiter and agenda-setter in the political arena.

Journalists receive many criticisms about the part they play in the political process: raising expectations about the success or failure of a candidate, running in herds after a story, predicting outcomes on apparently insubstantial evidence, ignoring the substantial for the trivial, and creating pseudo-events which are easy to cover but which have little importance.

This paper seeks to examine the role journalists play in the selection of a president. Our purpose is to look at some of the underlying reasons for the standard criticisms of journalists covering the campaign. We will explore three successive and interrelated points:

-- American journalists still place great stock in the concept of objectivity, primarily because they believe their readers and viewers will accept nothing else.

-- Because of this attitude, journalists covering presidential campaigns tend to cover campaign techniques rather than campaign issues because journalists can more easily appear objective about techniques.

-- This emphasis on technique, in the absence of issues, results in the media's actively reinforcing a tendency toward "consensus politics," in which a presidential candidate tries to look and sound like the candidate every voter wants. Candidates try to appear to be the candidate of consensus. They run a technically sound campaign. They deemphasize the development of issues. They force the electorate to choose a president on bases other than political beliefs and ideas.

Eric Hoffer has argued that the political leader uses the mass media and propaganda to bring "to a boil ideas and passions already simmering in the minds of his hearers. He echoes their innermost feelings. Where opinion is not coerced, people can be made to believe only in what they already 'know.'" (Hoffer, 1951, p. 98)

It is the thesis of this paper that the mass media have become preoccupied with reporting the techniques politicians use to create propaganda. Media do not critically examine the substance of positions candidates advocate in order to marshal votes. The resulting emphasis upon propaganda success or failure by media and politicians alike leads to a preoccupation with consensus rather than the systematic development of new solutions to public problems.

We further believe that this trend has intensified in recent years and can be found in most areas of politics today. John Carey (1967) studied print and broadcast coverage during the last four weeks of the 1974 congressional elections and reported three important findings. First, while press coverage was dominated by reports on issues, those issues were reported in terms of their strategic impact for the candidate. "The press was concerned with evaluating how the campaign was going; what techniques and strategy a candidate was using; where he currently stood in the polls and whether he had moved up or down since the last poll. Treatment of these topics was analogous to the color commentary in a professional football contest," Carey said. (p.52)

Second, the powerful news value of evaluating campaign strategy "was not only a major topic in itself, but also a principle frame surrounding coverage of other issues." (p.55) In other words, issues were discussed in terms of what they meant for the campaign and how they would affect the candidate's game plan.

Third, politicians respond to such coverage by "engaging in a meta-campaign, i.e., an attempt to demonstrate competence as campaign organizers and strategists. The meta-campaign is thus a campaign about the campaign." Carey reported. (p.56)

We have found that Carey's analysis of legislative races in 1974 can be extended. The approach he noted has been intensified in the presidential campaign of 1980. Coverage during pre-convention campaigning this year demonstrated the increasing emphasis by politicans and the mass media alike on the techniques of being

elected to public office. To win, politicians emphasize "consensus." To appear "unbiased," journalists emphasize "objectivity" and avoid discussing stands taken by politicians and the records they have made on specific issues. This reinforces "consensus" politics.

Media Emphasis upon Objectivity

The emphasis on objectivity in U.S. journalism can be traced to the late 1800s. (Mott, 1950, P. 411-414) But it was intensified following the debate in the late 1960s over the nature of reporting. (Wolfe, 1970) During that time, the so-called "new journalists" advocated a move away from "objectivity" and argued that the concept of objectivity was no longer helpful to reporting. (Krim, 1968, or McHam, 1972) Many journalism professors and professionals responded that not only was objectivity still important, but that the so-called new journalism was not new and, in the opinion of some, not even journalism. (Markel, 1972 and Brown, 1972) The debate ranged across many types of reporting and in the end introduced new attitudes and new techniques into the reporter's repertoire of tools. (Murphy, 1974; Self, 1973).

The debate had another result, as well. It intensified the concern of many journalists with the problem of objectivity. Whether they believed in it or not, many journalists became concerned lest their biases show in their reporting.

While many no longer claimed to be "objective," they became more sensitive to changes that they had allowed their personal feelings to interfere with their coverage of events. "In their news writing, reporters are not supposed to grind political, partisan, or personal axes," Hillier Kreigbaum pointed out in his book Pressures on the Press. "They are supposed to provide the informational grindstones on which their audiences may sharpen their own thinking." (Kreigbaum, pp. 102-103) He quoted David N. Schultz of the Redwood City (Calif.) Tribune: "The newspaper that tries to cover the 'why' of each news story runs the risk of being labeled a biased interpreter." (Kreigbaum, p. 112)

One example is the networks' coverage of the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the intense criticism they recieved because of it. That criticism had an obvious "chilling effect," according to Alfred du Pont: "...The shock to the networks' nervous systems was shown in the fastidious way they covered the minor incidents along the Inauguration parade route the following January -- NBC ignored them almost entirely; CBS reported them, but apologized repeatedly for doing so." (du Pont, 1969, pp. 25-26)

This sensitivity to charges of bias in reporting was reinforced by other events reporters covered during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The attacks on the press by Vice President Spiro Agnew, the Pentagon Papers case and Watergate were events highly charged with emotion, and they polarized critics of the press.

Sensitivity to charges of bias was further heightened by fundamental changes in the mass media that occurred during the 1970s. As television and radio developed,

a whole new series of electronic media (Xerox and computers, in particular) made possible other sources of basic information (financial data, instant reports, marketing analysis, etc.) (See Horowitz, 1968, for a discussion of what this has done to the "business" of mass media.) The media found themselves forced to provide more perspective, more interpretation and more analysis of information to stay competitive with faster, more convenient sources of data. This growing emphasis upon "interpretation" and analysis seems to have made journalists even more defensive about whether they were providing information without letting their biases become obvious and opening themselves to charges of unfair reporting.

Another development in the 1970s further contributed to this sensitivity. Social scientists intensified their study of the "effects" of the mass media on people in ways not seen before. Of course, journalists had long been thought to have had "effects" on their audiences, but the fundamental assumption underlying the emphasis by the new social scientists was that communication is the major means for forming the "self" and, therefore, the behavior of individuals. (See for example, Gerbner, 1975). This meant that mass media were inherently influential and that anything reported would influence the audience. It thus became imperative that whatever was reported be offset by opposing viewpoints.

Not only were there social and professional pressures on the journalist to attempt to be objective, but in the past 15 years legal pressures have developed as well. Those teaching that truth is the strongest defense against a libel suit are revising their lecture notes. Today, the strongest libel defense is what some mass media law scholars are calling "procedure."

Procedure refers to the way in which a journalist puts a story together. If a journalist can prove in court that he used "proper" journalistic procedure to put his story together -- that he checked all of the sources available, made reasonable judgments about his information, attempted to tell all sides of the story, gave people a chance to respond to charges and accusations, etc. -- then it is unlikely that a plaintiff can prove actual malice ("reckless disregard of the truth").

The procedure defense developed from two cases the Supreme Court considered together in 1967, Curtis v. Butts and AP v. Walker. These cases are famous for the development of the "public figure" status in libel action. In the first case, the Saturday Evening Post was found guilty of libeling a college football coach, in part, because of the sloppy way the writer and editors put together their story. In the second case, a defamation judgment against the Associated Press was dismissed because, even though the reporter had his facts wrong, he had followed a proper (i.e., objective) procedure in gathering his information and making a reasonable judgment based on the information he had.

Examining the facts surrounding the case, the Court said of the Saturday Evening Post case: "... The evidence is ample to support a finding of highly

unreasonable conduct constituting an extreme departure from the standards of investigation and reporting ordinarily adhered to by responsible publishers." And of the Associated Press: "... nothing in this series of events gives the slighest hint of a severe departure from accepted publishing standards." (Emphasis added) Curtis v. Butts; AP v. Walker, 338 U.S. 130 (1 Media Law Reporter 1568)

The Supreme Court did not delineate at that point just what those "accepted publishing standards" are, but it assumed, as did one justice with obscenity, that it would know them when it saw them. Many court cases since then have reemphasized the judicial branch's willingness to reward the objective reporter with a defense against libel action. In 1977 a Federal Circuit Appeals judge formulated the doctrine of "neutral reportage" as a qualified privilege for a reporter being sued for libel. The case, Edwards v. National Aubudon Society, 556, F. 2nd 113 (2 Media Law Reporter), involved a New York Times reporter who had reported the charges and counter-charges in an insecticide controversy. The court said of the reporter's actions:

> "It is clear here, that Devlin (the reporter) reported Aubudon's charges fairly and accurately. He did not in any way espouse the Society's accusations: indeed, Devlin publicized the maligned scientists' outraged reactions in the same article that contained the Society's attack. The Times article, in short, was the exemplar of fair and dispassionate reporting of an unfortunate but newsworthy contretemps. Accordingly, we hold that it was privileged under the First Amendment."

These and other cases further contribute to the preoccupation of journalists in the United States with avoiding the appearance of departures of any kind from standards of objectivity and unbiased reporting.

The American obsession with objectivity is seen more clearly in a comparative context. European newspapers, for the most part, have no qualms about taking stands and appearing biased in their news columns. Many allow and encourage their reporters to express their opinion about what they are covering. Since many of these newspapers appeal to smaller and more selected audiences, they are expected to have strong and obvious viewpoints.

American newspapers, with their attempts to be all things to all readers, often appear bland and unexciting by comparision. The uninitiated reader would be hard pressed to find any real differences in the regional newspapers throughout the country. The outcome and possible reasons behind these differences between the American and Eurpoean press were noticed by Alexis de Tocqueville as early as the 1830s when he wrote that Americans' deep passions are aroused only when their material interests are impaired:

> "In France the space allotted to commercial advertisements is very limited, and the news intelligence is not considerable, but the essential part of the journal is the discussion of the politics of the day. In America three quarters of the enormous sheet are filled

> with advertisements, and the remainder is frequently occupied by political intelligence or trivial anecdotes; it is only from time to time that one finds a corner devoted to passionate discussions like those which the journalists of France every day give to their readers." (de Tocqueville, p. 192)

The pressures on journalists to continue the quest for objectivity come from yet another quarter -- politicians. For politicians to criticize journalists is nothing new, but for journalists honestly responding to these pressures for objectivity, the criticism is particularly galling. The sharpest attacks of our age came, of course, from the Nixon administration in the form of Vice President Spiro Agnew. Using the catch-phrases of "effete snobs" and "nattering nabobs of negativism," Agnew accused the press of being controlled by an elite, Eastern establishment and slanting the news to its own ends.

The criticism took a sharper turn, however. The press was also accused of being unpatriotic and unsympathetic to the nation's goals and ideals. The press, it was said, was constantly harping on the negative, it was emphasizing the "bad news" instead of the "good news," and it was always attempting to publish news the Nixon Administration wanted to keep hidden. It was in this context that the Justice Department, under John Mitchell prosecuted the New York Times and the Washington Post for publishing the Pentagon Papers, even though those documents did not concern the current administration. (Rather and Gates, 1974)

Even President Jimmy Carter, whose relationship with the press differs greatly from that of Richard Nixon, has used the accusation of disloyalty against the press. Early in the Iranian crisis, Carter and his spokesmen criticized television coverage of the situation for constantly showing the large crowds which gathered outside the embassy, interviewing the Ayatollah (when the U.S. government had no direct contact with him), and allowing the militants at the embassy access during news shows and prime time (for a review of the Administration's criticism of the coverage, see Bagdikian, 1980).

The thrust of all these developments has been to place the journalist in a position of fearing to critically examine a position taken by his sources, lest he be accused of departing from "objective reporting." At the same time, his job requires more and more often that he "interpret," provide context, explain the "why" of things. As Elmer Davis put it:

> "This striving for objectivity was in its beginnings a good thing; but it went a little too far. From holding that newspapers ought to present both sides it went on to the position that it was all right to present only one side, if nobody happened to be talking on the other; and it was not the business of the newspaper to tell the reader if that one argument happened to be phony ...
>
> "This kind of dead-pan reporting -- so-and-so said it, and if he's lying in his teeth it isn't my business to say so -- may salve the conscience of the reporter (or the editor, who has the ultimate responsibility) as to his loyalty to some obscure ideal of objectivity. But what about his loyalty to the reader?" (Kreigbaum, p. 102).

Emphasizing the Techniques of the Campaign

Faced with these joint responsibilities of objectivity and interpretation, journalists covering political stories began trying to treat each candidate or point of view in a political campaign equally with others. (du Pont, p. 24). This was a task that was virtually impossible to carry out. The number of candidates running and the speed with which issues developed made it difficult to cover all sides of issues.

The solution to this dilemma was to concentrate less on issues and candidates' positions and more on what candidates were doing to try to get elected. It is easier to avoid being called biased if one avoids what is said and concentrates instead on the fact that something was said, the circumstances under which it was said and the possible reasons the candidate might have had for saying it -- in other words, to concentrate on the techniques of the campaign.

The tendency to do this means that the television networks, wire services and newspapers which staff the campaign pay a high price for trivia. Rather than accomplishing the original purpose of a political campaign -- to raise issues and discuss them publicly -- the press emphasizes the campaign itself. Who is ahead and who isn't? Who has momentum and who doesn't? What do the polls say? Reporters have become preoccupied with stumbles, blunders and "Big Mo" (momentum) and the effects they will have on the fortunes of the political candidates. One of the great fetishes the journalists have in this regard is the "mistakes" of a candidate. Campaign histories are littered with the Great Mistakes that candidates have made:

-- George Romney's comment that he had been "brainwashed" about Vietnam haunted him throughout his abbreviated 1967-68 campaign.

-- Edmund Muskie's crying in front of a Manchester, New Hampshire, newspaper office brought snickers rather than tears from the journalists who covered him and his short-lived campaign was never able to overcome it.

-- Jimmy Carter's statement concerning the "ethnic purity" of some northeastern urban neighborhoods preoccupied press coverage of the Carter campaign for several days.

-- Ronald Reagan's ethnic joke during the current campaign has rivaled many of Reagan's issue positions for the amount of news coverage received. Every scenario of the effects of the joke on voters was examined in detail. The impact was the issue. Reagan's record in dealing with minorities or his stand on minority needs has not. Coverage was preoccupied with political implications of the joke.

Possibly the classic case of a candidate's "mistake" making a real difference in the campaign was Gerald Ford's statement in the 1976 debates that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination. Paying little attention to the substance of Ford's

remark, the press was quick to point out how damaging it could be to him. In fact, as Witcover (1977) points out, Ford's aides blamed the press for the public's hostile reaction to his statement:

> According to Nessen and Duval (Ford's aides), a Teeter poll taken right after the debate had the President "winning" by 11 percentage points; but in successive polls through the next day as the press and television reaction spread, he fell progressively behind, until finally the surveys had him losing the debate by an incredible 45 points! What that meant to me," Nessen said afterward, "Was that the average guy in his living room watching the debate did not perceive it to be a monumental mistake. After twenty-four hours of being told it was a bad mistake, the public changed their minds." (p. 601)

One campaign worker in the 1980 campaign has complained that journalists are much more interested in mistakes than issues. "It's hard as hell to get issue coverage unless you screw up," he said. "And then it's mostly coverage on how the screwups affect the horserace." (Merry, 1980, p. 12)

Since candidates do not make mistakes every day, journalists must find other things to be insightful but objective about. Consequently, when President Carter criticized Senator Kennedy at a presidential press conference for statements Kennedy made about Carter's foreign policy, the press ignored the substance of Carter's accusations that Kennedy had been "unhelpful" during the Iranian Crisis and that he had "not told the truth."" Instead, it concerned itself with the fact that a President had used such a forum to make a sharp attack on his opponent. Reporters discussed at length the implications of the attack for Kennedy and for Carter. The substance of Kennedy's remarks and the substance of Carter's foreign policy record with regard to Kennedy's statements were barely mentioned.

The public was made aware that Senator Kennedy used a teleprompter when delivering a major speech, that Jerry Brown flew to Africa with Linda Ronstadt, that Johnny Connally spent $11 million and gained only one delegate, that George Bush did not fly in an airplane in which he was pictured arriving in his advertisements. All of these things the public may have needed (and wanted) to know. But beyond this kind of information, it did not learn a great deal about the programs offered by the candidates or about their records on specific issues.

This microscopic attention to the candidate's campaign has had other effects on the presidential selection process. It has changed the nature of the primary system. The original intent of a presidential primary was purely a local one: to allow presidential candidates to speak to the individual concerns of a particular state. The mass media quickly made primaries into something else -- a way of measuring the candidate's ability to draw votes. CBS media critic Jeff Greenfield has pointed out that because of the vast media attention given to individual primaries, they wind up as mini-presidential elections conducted on a week-to-week basis. States thus are robbed of a full discussion of the variety of issues

and options primaries once provided.

Instead, the horserace aspects of the campaign are emphasized. George Bush does well in Iowa, breaks out of the pack, and suddenly it becomes a two-man race. He loses in New Hampshire and is no longer a serious threat. John Anderson comes on to challenge Ronald Reagan in Massachusetts and Vermont. And he and Reagan are suddenly the major contenders. Reagan does well in the South and fights off another challenge from Bush and Anderson in Illinois. Connally, Dole and Baker have dropped out and Ford says he won't run. The media are beginning to call Reagan "unstoppable" with fewer than half the primaries decided. Time is spent on what part of Kennedy's anatomy Carter will whip next (and why a President would use the word "ass" to begin with). We know that the Republicans are mad at George Bush because he would not allow them to debate with him and Ronald Reagan, while Ronald Reagan "handled himself well" in that situation. We never miss an instance when one of the Republicans breaks the "Eleventh Commandment" and speaks ill of another Republican.*

Candidates quickly learn to take advantage of the press' preoccupation with campaigning techniques, and they structure their campaigns accordingly. The first and foremost rule is not to make any mistakes, and the easiest way not to make mistakes is not to campaign at all (although sometimes, even <u>that</u> is a mistake, e.g., Reagan in Iowa). Of course, it's not often that a candidate has the luxury of not campaigning, but it does happen. In 1976 Hubert Humphrey did not campaign and was often shown to be the poll-designated favorite for the nomination. So was Edward Kennedy in 1979.

A "rose garden strategy" is now part of the lexicon of American political life. That's when a president refuses to campaign. Many presidents have done this, including Jimmy Carter early this year, but the rose garden strategy as a means of avoiding and manipulating the press came into full bloom with Richard Nixon in 1972. As described by White (1973), Nixon, when he did venture out of the White House, had so many newsmen trying to cover the event and did such a good job at isolating himself from them that "it was easier to cover the President on campaign in 1972 by staying home and watching television with the rest of the people -- which was the way Nixon wanted it." (p. 283)

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* An interesting sidelight to the coverage of controversies is the way in which news organizations have injected themselves into the process. When the <u>Des Moines Register</u> was to sponsor a debate between Kennddy and Carter, the paper said Jerry Brown couldn't participate unless he campaigned in Iowa. The <u>Nasuaha Telegraph,</u> in a debate it sponsored, would not allow John Anderson, Howard Baker, and Phillip Crane to join in. And in December, NBC, CBS and ABC refused to sell Carter time to kick off his campaign because, they said, December was too early to begin campaigning.

Candidates who do not play by the strategy rules are soon coopted by the emphasis upon strategy in the media and among their fellow candidates. John Anderson supported gun control before a sportsman's organization during the New Hampshire primary while all his fellow candidates were capitulating to the group. That resulted, not in an examination of his stand on gun control and what it might mean for the country, but rather in a discussion of his "frankness" and how that would sit with voters and how it would work as campaign strategy. Anderson's increasing popularity in subsequent weeks was seen as attributable, not to his stands on the issues, but to his "frankness" and the fact that he brought a "breath of fresh air" into the campaign.

George Bush refused to discuss what he called the "mechanics" of the campaign following his loss of Illinois and his subsequent victory in Connecticut. The response from the media and his fellow candidates after Illinois was that his refusal was a clear indication that Bush was in deep trouble. Few media people seemed interested in changing the emphasis of their questioning and pursuing substantive discussions of Bush's stands on the issues.

Kennedy's continued campaign this summer, even after Carter had won more than enough delegates to secure the nomination, was one that was specifically issue oriented. While making some effort to wrest delegates away from Carter, Kennedy's main concern in June and July was to contrast his more liberal positions with those of the president. The media, in general, paid very little attention to this effort and instead focused on the techniques: was there any way the convention could swing to Kennedy? how would Kennedy's campaign affect his standing in the Democratic party and his chances for the nomination in the future? etc.

Mass Media Reinforcement of Consensus Politics

The selection of an American president is basically an exercise in consensus politics. "Issue candidates" are often elbowed out of the process in favor of those whom voters "trust", who look good on television, and who handle themselves well in campaign. Candidates realize that to win national elections, they must appeal to a broad spectrum of voters and interests. And the mass media, because of the pressures placed on them, often reinforce this tendency.

While studies about the effects the mass media have on voting behavior have revealed no absolute conclusions, they have shown some generally applicable principles. One of those, according to Flanigan (1972), is that the most stable voters (those who change very little from election to election) are those who either pay a lot of attention to the mass media or very little attention to the mass media.

> "The shifting, unstable voters are more likely to be exposed moderately to the mass media ... The shifting voters are moderately involved in politics and moderately exposed to mass media, but seemingly new information can have a substantial

> impact on their vote choice since their commitment is less intense." (p. 114)

These shifting, unstable voters can have a decisive impact on the outcome of elections. They decide this outcome on the basis of what the media report. As we have seen, the media report primarily campaign strategy and technique, current standings and candidate image. Voters who use the media casually must pick a president on the basis of how well he runs his campaign, the fact that he has the "Big Mo," that he does not make mistakes, and other non-issue based considerations.

The result is that candidates pay careful attention to these considerations. They put less effort into the development of comprehensive policies about current problems that would become "issues" to be explained to the public and to serve as the basis for putting together a coalition of voters holding similar beliefs.

Instead, in recent years, candidates have attempted to put together an "image" that will appeal to a consensus. Thus, while the media chastized Jimmy Carter in 1976 for being "fuzzy" on the issues and speculated endlessly about the impact such fuzziness might have on voters, they agreed that he was a "good" man, a "moral" man, a "sincere" man. If there is anything Americans have consensus about, it is that a president should be a good, moral, sincere man. Never mind his policies.

This same technique was used early in the campaign by Carter's advisers in 1980. Again, the media speculated endlessly about the impact of the rose garden strategy and about Carter's refusal to debate Kennedy, and again the media reported the belief by all concerned that Carter was a good, moral, sincere man. Even the Administration's blunder in the UN on a key vote on Jewish settlements was explained as a "mistake" by Carter aides who argued that this was an example of how honest Carter was. What other politican would admit such a mistake? The media speculated about the impact of the mistake in New York. It did hurt Carter there. But the media failed to take a long, critical look at Carter policy and the voting public generally was left with the impression that Carter has made an honest mistake and has paid the price.

Walter Lippmann pointed out as early as 1922 that politicans were beginning to emphasize the development of votes by appealing to consensus rather than by the development of new solutions to problems.

> "The creation of consent is not a new art. It is a very old one which was supposed to have died out with the appearance of democracy. But it has not died out. It has, in fact, improved enormously in technic, because it is now based on analysis rather than on rule of thumb. And so, as a result of psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication, the practice of democracy has turned a corner. A revolution is taking place, infinitely more significant than any shifting of economic power.
>
> "Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no

> daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise. Under the impact of propaganda, not necessarily in the sinister meaning of the word alone, the old constants of our thinking have become variables." (Lippmann, 1949, p. 158)

Lippmann's insight, as usual, was on target. The weakness of American political parties is that they have no fast hold on any of the identifiable groups in society. Polsby and Wildavsky (1971) write that for this reason, parties can take few clearly defined stands on issues: "...the parties try to do things which will keep happy the groups consistently allied to them without alienating other groups unduly. Thus the temptation for parties to avoid specific policy commitments in many areas is very great." (p. 32)

The presidency itself has become the focal point for marshalling public opinion based upon analysis of what the public wants. The public opinion poll has become an increasingly important part of deciding what public policy should be. This is especially true during election years when the president is himself up for reelection.

Richard E. Neustadt argued in 1960 that the presidency has become the center of all governmental initiatives.

> "In form all Presidents are leaders nowadays...Other men have found it practically impossible to do their jobs without assurance of initiatives from him. Service for themselves, not power for the President has brought them to accept his leadership in form. They find his actions useful in their business. The transformation of his routine obligations testifies to their dependence on an active White House. A President, these days, is an invaluable clerk." (Neustadt, 1960, p. 19)

Presidential candidates have the same basic problem. A candidate, no matter what his party affiliation, must draw voters and adherents from as many segments of political society as possible. To stake out a set of well-defined positions necessarily excludes some segments from which he may need votes. Rather, a candidate is compelled to demonstrate during the nominating process that he can draw votes not only from within his own party but also from the opposing party. In this way, he becomes "electable" in the general election. This requires that he appear to provide the "initiatives" each major public wants.

Because this situation exists, the image of the candidate becomes much more important than his political stands. The mass media again make a major contribution in this area. Not only do they help a candidate formulate his image, but they reinforce that image by consistently reporting on it. A reporter finds it easier to be objective about a candidate's image than his stands (or lack of them) on certain issues.

Another favorite topic of reporters seeking to avoid the thin ice of issue coverage is public opinion polls. There is nothing startling about a candidate taking an opinion poll; such activity is part of the life of a political campaign.

Opinion polls, however, have taken on a reality of their own. As Daniel J. Boorstin (1961) points out:

> "In the succeeding Presidential elections, as more elaborate polling techniques were perfected and as voters became accustomed to following the polls, the polls became the political equivalent of the Racing Form. They became more and more interesting for their own sakes. Now politicians and pundits were constantly being asked not merely about the issues and the candidates and the state of public sentiment, but about the meaning of specific polls. People speculated about the effect on voters of revealing this or that set of figures. After each election, one of the most widely interesting news items was the degree of accuracy of each of the different polls. Prominent pollsters were interviewed, encouraged to speculate, explore, defend and wonder over their results.
>
> "Now the consumer can look at advertisements to see what he 'really' wants (the best manufacturers make only products which they are convinced the consumer really wants). Now the citizen can see himself in the mirror of the opinion polls." (p. 238)

The mass media not only contribute to this reality by reporting on polls, but they have become intimately involved with it by creating polls on their own. Polls can be reported on without the appearance of bias. They are "scientific" data. Reporters can interpret them often without fear of contradiction.

Consequently, the media have joined in. In 1980 Lou Harris has become a standard feature of ABC News. CBS and the New York Times have teamed up to run polls of their own regularly. Reports on these polls have little to do with leadership or policy issues.

Leo Bogart (1972) has pointed out that leaders must be careful not to give up their role of shaping public opinion to the public opinion poll. Leaders who place too much emphasis on following public opinion misunderstand modern polling techniques and their place in politics, he said.

> "Polls are commonly used as political weapons either to support state policies or to insist on changes in those policies and in priorities. Such citations of survey data ignore the proper target. Polls can best be used not to make decisions but to provide useful intelligence for policy makers, who must always have access to other kinds of information and to other criteria of judgment.
>
> Public opinion is strongly responsive to leadership, and poll results must be interpreted accordingly." (pp. 45-46)

The Journalist as Middleman, Arbiter

The position of the journalist in reporting a campaign, of course, is that of a very active middleman. Since he supposedly (although not necessarily) has the most information about the candidates (their images and their positions) and the people (the polls), the journalist becomes a major arbiter of the political system. He may allow and exclude entry of candidates into the system in some cases.

More importantly, he can make certain demands on the candidates. One of those inherent demands is that the candidate get along reasonably well with the reporters who are covering him. On another level a candidate must have an ability to "look good on television" and answer even the most complicated questions with glib, articulate, quotable quotes. Any candidate who does not meet these requirements will probably not last very long in presidential politics.

But journalists can, and often do, demand even more than this; they can demand a certain policy articulation and an image on the part of the candidate. For the most part, journalists demand "moderation." In the world of consensus politics -- which journalists know well because they helped create it -- no candidate can do well without a good dose of moderation.

It seems to have always been so, at least in modern American politics. In 1964, when Barry Goldwater won the Republican nomination, many thought that he would soften his stands on the issues. Those thoughts were put to rest on the night Goldwater gave his "extremism in the defense of liberty" acceptance speech at the Republican convention in San Francisco. As White (1965) later wrote: "The best quick reaction I remember is that of another reporter who, halfway through Goldwater's speech, slowly became aware of the politics of no compromise, then turned and remarked, 'My God, he's going to run as Barry Goldwater.'"

The thought that Barry Goldwater might not modify his conservative image horrified the journalist then, and it still does today. Much journalistic ink was spilled in the early part of the current campaign on how Ronald Reagan would have to "soften" his image as a conservative if he had a chance of winning. Acting on that theory, John Sears, Reagan's first campaign manager, made serious attempts at remolding Ronald Reagan's image for broader public consumption. In February Sears lost his job because the ideologues in Reagan's camp said he had gone too far in these efforts.

In the same manner, the wisdom among mass media analysts was that Edward Kennedy would also have to moderate his image as a liberal in order to win votes. Kennedy adhered to this demand somewhat and deemphasized his tendency to advocate new government programs and defend others which had once supported.

Some candidates make it over the threshold of presidential politics without "moderating" either their stands or their image. Journalists ignore these candidates as long as they can, downplaying their chances of attracting any significant portion of the electorate. Occasionally, such a candidate will last long enough to gain media attention and have an impact on the process.

The media attention this candidate receives is often directed more toward the candidate's image than his stand on the issues. Journalists begin evaluating the candidate on the basis of his impact on the process; the fact that he may draw voters away from another candidate; or that he is appealing to a sleeping or silent

portion of the electorate. Journalists rarely examine his stands on the issues. Theirs is the attention of the curious and not the seriously interested.

The candidate who tries to "run on the issues" faces yet another problem in dealing with the mass media. Neither print nor broadcast journalists are equipped to deal adequately with a candidate who has well thought out positions on isuues. The first thing both will look for is the catchphrase -- the verbal shorthand they can use to refer to a candidate's position without explaining what that position is. Catchphrases are good for on-the-hour news broadcasters and headline writers. Nixon's "peace with honor," McGovern's "thousand-dollar giveaway," and George Wallace's "send them a message" were all phrases journalists used frequently but paid little attention to.

The distorting nature of the headline and the catchphrase is well known. Goldwater's proposal to make Social Security voluntary is an example. As White (1965) writes, "It was headlines rather than statement that shaped the issue of Social Security against Goldwater." Campaigning in New Hampshire in January 1964, Goldwater was asked about Social Security and reiterated his long held stand for making it voluntary. The headline in the next day's Concord Monitor read: GOLDWATER SETS GOALS: END SOCIAL SECURITY. (p. 303)

The fact that serious discussion of issues is playing less of a role in presidential campaigns is evident. Journalists, adhering to the goal of objectivity, have emphasized campaigning techniques and treated issues as strategies for achieving consensus. Candidates, finding it inconvenient to talk about issues, have responded by feeding the media great quantities of information about techniques. Journalists have not insisted that they explain the details of their stands. Candidates who do want to develop issues instead of consensus often are seen as inept or incapable of victory and so receive little serious coverage by technique-oriented media.

For the political system, all of this means that the electorate is treated to a steady diet of information about techniques, controversies and perishable news by both candidates and the media.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to come to grips with what has become a regular feature of American presidential politics: the tendency of candidates to seek consensus rather than to try to discover new answers to problems and to convince voters that they should be elected to implement those answers.

We have pointed out that for a variety of reasons, reporters in the mass media today emphasize objectivity and fairness in their reporting. This emphasis results in intense interest by reporters in the "electability of a candidate and the techniques and strategies that candidates will use to get elected. It

results in little emphasis on the viability of solutions offered by candidates to public problems.

This emphasis on the techniques of campaigning results in reporting concerned with popular opinion polls, "mistakes" by candidates, moral issues, and image questions. Reporting on those items in turn reinforces an emphasis by the candidates themselves upon such questions (in their planning and in their public presentations, particularly for media consumption.) Thus candidates become concerned with building their campaigns upon "consensus" rather than through fresh leadership positions that can be sold to the public through careful explanation and careful scrutiny.

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